



Our Resilience Approach

For Mercy Corps, resilience is a process, a way of thinking and acting, not just an end state. We work to build diverse connections and relationships between people, communities and the systems that support them to plan, prepare and manage for change in times of increasingly complex and dynamic crises.

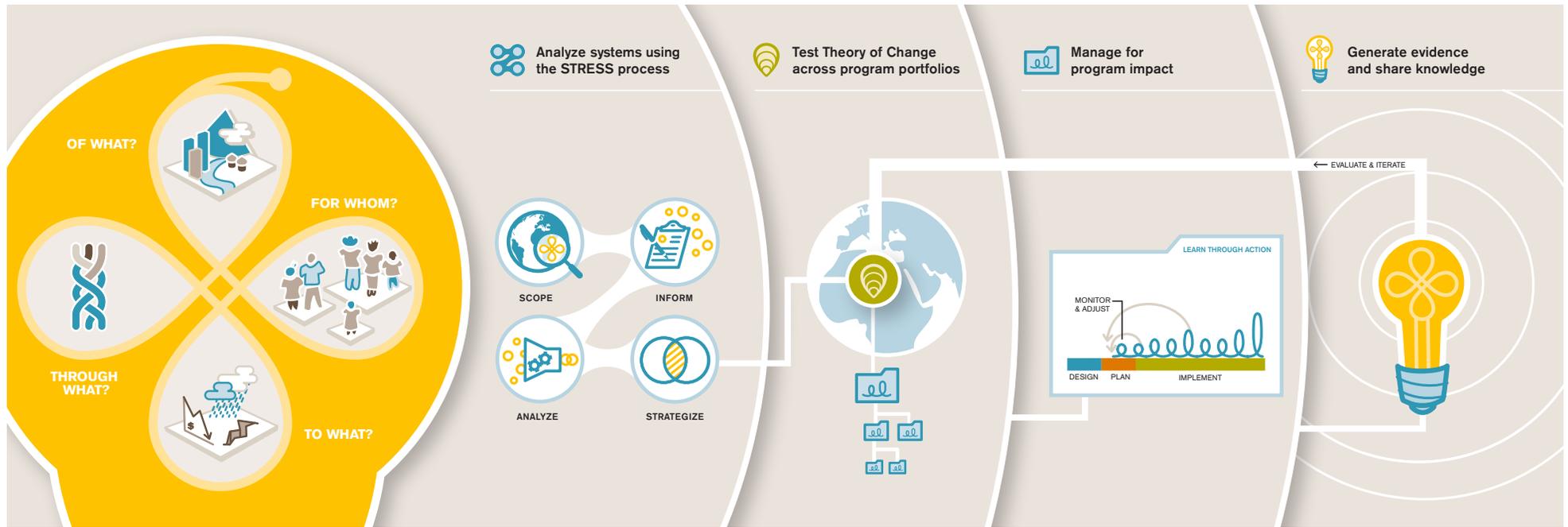
Our approach is a direct response to our definition of resilience: *The capacity of communities in complex socio-ecological systems to learn, cope, adapt, and transform in the face of shocks and stresses.*

We recognize that addressing recurrent crises and building resilience requires an integrated systems approach to humanitarian response and development programming. By understanding the root causes of vulnerability, our work can support a community's capacity to cope with disturbances, adapt to changing conditions, and enable learning, innovation and transformation.

Mercy Corps' role is to look across inter-connected social, ecological and economic systems to help determine how they influence the communities we serve. We work in partnership with multiple actors to identify which vulnerabilities and capacities are the most critical to address.

Working through local champions, we strengthen existing opportunities for positive change. Together, we learn how to ensure long-term development gains and build resilience.

Mercy Corps' Resilience Framework



Guiding Questions

Four guiding questions help identify vulnerabilities and capacities to influence resilience strategies.

- + Of What?
- + For Whom?
- + To What?
- + Through What?



Three Capacities

Resilience requires short-term absorptive and medium-term adaptive capacities, supported by the long-term capacity to transform the underlying cultural, institutional and learning dynamics within the system. Strengthen all three to equip households, communities and systems to manage shocks and stresses.



STRESS Process

Strategic Resilience Assessments lead to a Theory of Change by taking a systems approach to collecting and analyzing data across scales and sectors.



Theory of Change

The Theory of Change articulates a measurable path to a desired impact, which is then tested through program portfolios and interventions.



Adaptive Management

Resilience programs are guided by adaptive management practices. This ensures that measurement is in place to inform adjustments, make strategic changes or rethink the Theory of Change. Continually monitor, adjust and iterate to create deeper and wider impact.



Evidence-Based Learning

Progressively build an evidence base by testing what works on the ground. This is key to unlocking social learning – the sharing of both scientific and local knowledge between individuals, communities and institutions.





Our Guiding Questions for Resilience Thinking

Four questions frame how we apply resilience thinking to a development program or across a portfolio of programs. Answering these questions helps us, as practitioners, develop and maintain adaptive, resilience-focused programming over time. This framework is essential because it puts resilience into the unique context of a region, its characteristics and its capacities.



QUESTION 1 Resilience of What?

This question helps us focus on defining the boundaries of our work, recognizing it takes many initiatives and multiple actors to build resilience. It refers to both the geography we wish to target, as well as the elements of social, economic and ecological systems within that geography that could impact its resilience.

The target geography may be defined by ecological boundaries (for example, a watershed, an agro-ecological zone or a flood-plain), administrative boundaries (for example, states, districts, cities, etc.) or economic boundaries as seen in market or financial systems. These boundaries may vary significantly in scale.

The target geography is also broken into three main systems: social, ecological and economic. These systems are connected and interact together to influence development progress and resilience capacities.

Social Systems: The relationships, networks, behaviors, and cultural rules and norms between people, households, communities and groups (for example, political systems, class systems).

Ecological Systems: The natural resources and/or ecosystems services that support the major

livelihood strategies and living conditions in the target area (for example, a freshwater system).

Economic Systems: The systems enabling the availability and use of the dominant production and/or consumption activities in the target geography (for example, agricultural production markets).



QUESTION 2 Resilience for Whom?

This question seeks to investigate whose resilience we are seeking to build by more clearly understanding social and geographic drivers of vulnerability. The inequitable distribution of rights, resources and power may make certain individuals, households, communities or groups more sensitive to the impacts of shocks and stresses.

Vulnerability varies across a given geography and across social groups. Therefore, it is important to consider who is most vulnerable within the selected geography or system.

Defining the likely target population for future interventions will provide parameters for understanding how these groups face differing risks. Gender, race, ethnicity, and age are examples of key factors.



QUESTION 3 Resilience to What?

This question is how we characterize specific shocks and stresses, which threaten the target population, at multiple geographic and temporal scales and across systems. We can begin to prioritize actions based on our understanding of the level of risk. Shocks are rapid or slow-onset events that tend to be relatively short in duration. Stresses are recent conditions or pressures that develop more slowly over longer timeframes, can originate at various scales (i.e., individual, community, regional, national and international), and introduce a new element of change and unpredictability into the system.



QUESTION 4 Resilience Through What?

This question addresses the need to strengthen three capacities to better equip individuals, households, communities and systems to prepare for and deal with risk over time. Mercy Corps envisions resilience capacities as strands of rope, each made stronger when braided together as one.

The capacities required for resilience are:

Absorptive Capacity: The ability to minimize sensitivity to shocks and stresses. Examples include informal savings and loan groups, hazard insurance and disaster preparedness.

Adaptive Capacity: The ability to proactively modify conditions and practices in anticipation of or as a reaction to shocks and stresses. Examples include livelihood diversification, access to weather or market information, access to technical training and new skill development.

Transformative Capacity: Creates the conditions to facilitate systemic change and a positive environment in which people are willing and able to invest and innovate, while managing risks. Transformative capacity addresses the underlying cultural, institutional and learning dynamics within the system, enabling communities to absorb and adapt over the long term. Examples include: inclusive control over shared resources; equitable and transparent budgeting processes; and generation and adoption of knowledge.





Applying Resilience Thinking



Strategic Resilience Assessments

Mercy Corps operationalizes resilience thinking through our Strategic Resilience Assessment (STRESS) process, a key element of how our teams and partners develop longer-term resilience strategies. Framed by the four resilience questions, it is a process of analyzing systems, the impacts of various shocks and stresses across scales, and identifying needed resilience capacities.

The STRESS process is designed to inform and facilitate the development of a theory of change, which articulates how a strategy or program will build resilience in support of humanitarian and development goals. It can be applied to country-level strategy development or to complex program design.

Specifically, the **STRESS** process seeks to:

- Identify, understand and prioritize** shocks and stresses in the given context that could impact or undermine wider development outcomes.
- Understand the ability or opportunities** for people, households, communities and systems to absorb, adapt and transform in the face of identified disturbances.
- Understand the impact** of these shocks and stresses on different population sub-groups or geographies.

The best way to understand complexity is through practice. STRESS is designed as a learning process, which focuses on gathering an initial “good enough” understanding of the context. It supports ongoing analysis with a set of products that can be used and adapted as programs are implemented.



Theories of Change

The Theory of Change is a team’s guide for operationalizing resilience. It articulates how or why a proposed intervention is expected to result in specific change. However, our work across different regions has demonstrated the need to adapt our theories of change over time, as we build a base of evidence through a series of layered, integrated and sequenced programs. This helps us develop strategic regional approaches that maximize the impact of our country program portfolios.

Specifically, a theory of change is a written or illustrated description of how we believe our interventions will lead to a desired outcome. It is a measurable path to a desired impact, which is tested across the portfolio and within individual programs, and then adjusted based on our learning. Once we intervene, our progress is continually gauged against the theory of change. This best practice forces us to constantly monitor, evaluate and adapt our programs to maximize impact.



Adaptive Management

At Mercy Corps, we embrace a culture of adaptive management throughout the design, planning and implementation stages of our resilience-focused programs. The process empowers teams to acknowledge uncertainty and unpredictability, seek opportunities to experiment, and adapt and scale approaches in response to rapid feedback loops, changing circumstances and new information.

We learn best through action. Our aim is to gain a good enough understanding of the context and then advance quickly to implementation where we learn, refine and iterate in response to our deeper appreciation of the underlying constraints and opportunities. Excellent monitoring processes feed a continual flow of information, which teams use to change strategies, plans and activities.





Applying Resilience Thinking



Resilience Measurement

You can't improve what you can't measure. Putting solid metrics in place is a critical aspect of Mercy Corps' approach to building resilience. Good measurement approaches enable us to continually monitor and adjust to create deeper and wider impact. What we learn can cause us to completely rethink our theories of change.

However, resilience is a new approach, and there are few existing tools or frameworks to measure its impact. Metrics that work for one region may be completely irrelevant to a neighboring region. No single set of indicators will adequately capture resilience – the concept is simply too diverse.

Mercy Corps' approach to measuring resilience is based on understanding the relationships between three sets of factors:

Capacities such as livelihood opportunities, access and use of essential services, or other abilities presumed to be linked with more successful coping strategies or adaptations to risk.

Development outcomes such as food security, improved health or

reduced poverty – measures of which should be captured both before and after a disturbance.

Shocks and stresses such as droughts, conflict or food-price spikes – including the assessment of the magnitude and levels of exposure to disturbances.

Bringing together these measurements tells us how certain capacities mitigate the effects of specific shocks or stressors on household or community wellbeing.



Evidence-Based Learning

Developing an evidence base by testing, measuring and sharing what works on the ground is critical to building resilience. It's the key to unlocking social learning—sharing both scientific and local knowledge between individuals, communities and institutions.

Mercy Corps is committed to sharing our lessons widely with partners and stakeholders, using a growing evidence base to increase our impact.

In the end, knowledge is what accelerates us toward our vision of a world of inclusive, capacity-rich communities where all people have options and opportunities for growth.



Mercy Corps Resilience Principles

4 principles guide our resilience approach:

PRINCIPLE 1

Complex dynamics require a systems approach

We operate in the context of complex social, political, economic and ecological landscapes that shape communities. We know that these systems are dynamic, unpredictable and deeply inter-connected. The quality of our interventions hinges on our ability to understand the dynamics and relationships at play. Our resilience approach starts with analysis of these systems but moves quickly to intervention, where we can learn and adjust.

PRINCIPLE 3

Strong partnerships and dynamic relationships are transformative

We believe strong partnerships and social learning drive new ideas, and the adaptation and promotion of shared interests. Partners enable us to unlock capacities in each community, fostering a just, secure and productive environment.

PRINCIPLE 2

Our role is one of facilitation

We develop capacities and relationships that enable these complex systems and the people within them to adapt in the face of change.

We don't try to become part of the system. Instead, we catalyze and support inclusive systems through a facilitative approach. We build awareness, create linkages and promote an environment of inclusivity, collaboration and trust.

PRINCIPLE 4

Model, test and iterate to build an evidence-base toward resilience

We know building resilience takes time. It is rarely visible within the cycle of an individual project. Our aim is to build and strengthen the evidence base for resilience by continually modeling, testing, measuring and refining program strategies through country and regional portfolios.





Mercy Corps is a leading global humanitarian agency saving and improving lives in the world's toughest places.

Poverty. Conflict. Disaster. In more than 40 countries, we partner with local people to put bold ideas into action, help them overcome adversity and build stronger communities. Now, and for the future.

Resilience at Mercy Corps

The capacity of communities in complex socio-ecological systems to learn, cope, adapt and transform in the face of shocks and stresses.

mercycorps.org/resilience

